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A Cycle of Retaliatory Violence

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IN THE comparisons being drawn between President Reagan's action now and his rhetoric of 1980, some are focusing too narrowly on the question of "swift retaliation." It should be remembered that Reagan

By Garry Wills

the candidate said retaliation would not be necessary if America stood tall enough so that nobody would mess around with us. Jimmy Carter was the one who had made America a target by weakening us. Just give Ronald Reagan some time to show he means business and no one would dare to take us on.

Well, the president has had over four years, and he said in his press conference that terrorism has never been so constant in threat and practice. We do not scare them after all.

The fallacy in Mr. Reagan's earlier approach was to think that everything turned on

the nature of our national will. If we were strong enough, we would be invulnerable. If we faltered, we would be victimized. Now he claims we are strong and victimized at the same time. To those believing in the sufficiency of the individual will, that is a contradiction.

Little children think the world centers on them, and if they just scream long enough, hold their breath long enough, throw a long enough tantrum, they will get their way - and sometimes they do.

But growing up means learning that there are multiple forces at work in the large world, some outside one's control, or even understanding - some irrational, some mystical, some religious, some-patriotic. For us to thump our chest does not inhibit all actions based on those motives, or any of them in the same way. In some of them, it provokes attack. In general, the strong, the rich, the powerful are blackmailed, harassed, kidnapped - they are in a position to pay and suffer and publicize more than the weak and obscure.

Though some of these lessons have sunk into President Reagan's head, he will not give up the "tough talk" that goes with his former

view rather than with his present actions. He says he is checked because, unlike President Carter, he is not dealing with a government. That is quibbling and ungracious - the zealots of Iran were under the protection of a faction in Iran's divided government, just as the Shi'ite zealots are under the protection of a faction of the divided Lebanese government. President Reagan indicated that by holding the head of that faction, Nabih Berri, responsible. He cannot say he does not act because no one is responsible, and at the same time name the man as the responsible agent.

Besides, a government, Russia, was responsible for shooting down the Korean airliner, and President Reagan did not mount any swift retaliation. A government was responsible for imposing martial law in Poland, and he did not retaliate. A government, Iran, sheltered hijackers who killed two Americans just last year, and he did not retaliate.

In fact, as Carol Bell points out in the current issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Jimmy Carter did more actual retaliating (as opposed to talking about it) than Ronald Reagan has. Mr. Carter imposed the grain embargo and put the Moscow Olympics off-limits.

I am not saying this to argue that Mr. Reagan should have retaliated. But it is cruel for him to miss chances for negotiation now because of the fiction that he is too strong to talk. I wrote just a month ago that Mr. Reagan had a growing hostage problem (then it was five, taken individually in Lebanon; now it is seven) that the administration did not want to acknowledge because it would show weakness.

Tough talk and retaliation are not the answer to our problem, they are part of our problem. The hostages now being held were taken because of American and Israeli tough talk in action - Israel's invasion of Lebanon and our support of it, Israel's taking hostages out of Lebanon, and our CIA's training of counterterrorists who blew up 80 people friendly to the current captors.

That cycle of retaliatory violence grows, not decreases, by truculence and death. The more "counterterrorists" we train, without knowing exactly what they are going to do, the more we will be targets for terror. It is time to negotiate, openly, without bluster. With our citizens' lives at stake, we cannot afford more tantrums.